

ADVENT

THE ONCE AND FUTURE COMING OF JESUS CHRIST¹

Today, I am going to confess to you why Advent is so hard for me. Advent is easy and fun when I see it in sentimental and romantic terms as the run up to Jesus in a manger. The problem here, when viewed this way, is that it is pleasurable, but it is not meaningful. It has little or no capacity for transformation. This romantic lens also does not do justice to Scripture and to the history of our liturgy. To discern the significance of Advent, we must “dig a little,” and it is my practice to avoid digging because it is hard work.

We will have 3 sessions together, and my first observations center on how Advent is “hard” for us. It is not my design to entertain you, but it is my hope that you will be thoughtfully engaged. These talks are being audio-recorded and will be on my Servant web page. No audio visuals will be used and that is quite on purpose. I do not want you to be distracted by color slides, but rather I want you to use your imagination. This will be a challenge for us, because I am inviting you to imagine something quite out of the ordinary.

The Once and Future Coming, Part I

Advent is ‘hard’ for us because it calls us to live into a rather unnatural state of being. It calls us to a conversion that will require our moving totally against the flow of contemporary culture and into being totally counter cultural. In most of our minds, Advent is simply preparation for Christmas. Indeed, it is that, but it is not the popular Santa Claus in a manger materialism of our sixty days of shopping left till Christmas. Nor is it the ‘Away in a Manger’ sentimentality, unless we center on the verse that says, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.” Indeed, Advent is about the hopes and fears of all the ages being met in the coming of the Incarnate God to heal our world in a consummate reconciliation.

¹ I am borrowing this title from one of my favorite preachers, Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge, whose 2018 book by this title is both the inspiration for and partial resource for these Advent lessons here at Church of the Servant.

Most of the time, unfortunately, we gloss over this into order to rush to the manger and the Christmas tree – with not much distinction between the two destinations.

A genuine celebration of Advent is hard for us because we want to make it merely personal in the sense of individual. To be sure, it is deeply personal, but it should never be merely individual. Advent is cosmic. It is about the redemption of all of creation: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.” (II Cor. 5:19) Let me say a bit more about why I believe Advent is comprehensively counter-cultural by setting out briefly some dominant characteristics of our American culture.

The first characteristic I would note is the ***Modern moral order***. A new ***understanding of morality*** that focuses on the organization of society for mutual benefit rather than as an obligation to "higher" or eternal norms. In our modern construal, the "moral" is bound up with (and perhaps reduced to) the "economic." Everything is measured in economic terms. Seen through the lens of the modern moral order, Advent cannot be about Christmas because we have lost sight of the ‘reason for the season.’ Not only in the Christmas shopping season, but all the year round, we have commodified everything, and that includes human beings. We measure people by their net worth and their economic contributions. In such a society, Jesus would not be of any account. Born in Bethlehem, Jesus and Joseph and Mary were refugees in Egypt pursued for slaughter by Pharaoh’s henchmen. In America today, refugees are not people of infinite worth created in the image of God. Refugees are scum.

Western society, as a whole, has bought into a totally naturalistic order of existence. It is no longer about creation but about coming into existence. Most of us would be insulted to suggest that we are atheistic or agnostic, but let’s explore this a bit. A quarter of a century ago, a most famous atheist, Stephen Hawking, said, “The human race is just a chemical scum on an average-sized planet, orbiting round a very average-size star, in the outer suburb of one of a million galaxies” [hence the expression: “You chemical scum, you”].² Two assumptions are at

² Quoted in Raymond Tallis, *Reflections of a Mataphysical Flaneur* (New York: 2014).

work here: Humanity is an insignificant accident in the evolution of the universe and as such human beings are therefore insignificant scum.

My point here is not that we readily agree with the scum assertions of Hawking, but rather that we are playing into his atheism when we reduce fellow human beings to objects of economic productivity. Against this the God of the universe screams out an eternal NO ! In this ETERNAL NO, we encounter Advent. Created in the image and likeness of God, every human being is of infinite worth – of such worth that God’s very self comes and dwells among us for our salvation.

Another way that Advent is hard for us to adequately visualize and internalize is rooted in modern notions about individuality. We all know about medicines like buffered aspirin and buffered vitamin C. I would suggest to you that in our current secular world, we have become **Buffered selves**.³ In the modern social imaginary, the self is sort of insulated in an interior "mind," no longer vulnerable to the transcendent order (God), on the one hand, or cosmic forces of evil (The Devil), on the other hand. These dimensions are largely absent from the modern social narrative. Even in church, it rather quaint to entertain such language. We of the older generation remember the language, but I believe I speak not only for myself when I say that few of us live our day to day lives under that sacred canopy. At the personal level, this may be the most pervasive change with which the Church has to deal. Our deepest selves are buffered against the intrusion of the divine. In this sense of buffered selves, we are increasingly secular.

Christian scholars who study our social/religious context have a definition of this:

Exclusive humanism: A worldview or social imaginary that is able to account for meaning and significance without any appeal to the divine or transcendence. It bothers me to put it this way, but we are all for the most part secular humanists. What I mean by that is this. We live our lives rather completely in an **Immanent frame**. A constructed social space that frames our lives

³ For these fundamental characteristics of Secularity, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). Fortunately for all of us, in 2014, James K.A. Smith published **How (Not) to be Secular** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). When Charles Taylor lectured at Duke, he said, "Jamie Smith understands me better than I understand myself." I recommend that you read Smith before you try to read Taylor.

entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order. It is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary that precludes the vertical dimension – transcendence. That is why Advent is so hard for us, but that is also why we are in dire need of an authentic perspective on Advent and Christmas.

In the biblical narrative describing our social imaginary, humans are important, but God is the central player in the drama. There are **three** dimensions in interplay. Under the Sacred Canopy⁴ we live in a between time – the time between God’s first coming at Christmas and the anticipated Second Coming. In this ‘between time’, as moderns, we fail to give adequate attention to the central player (God) in the opera of life, and moreover, we have written another actor out of the script. God is at work, human beings are at play and the Evil One (in Scripture variously called Satan, the devil, Beelzebul, “the ruler of this world” and “the prince of the power of the air”) is intent on disruption and destruction. To my mind, no one has captured the drama better than Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “God and the devil are fighting there, and the battlefield is the human heart.” This is what Advent is all about. It is little wonder that we find it hard. Our Christmas season is a studied avoidance of this Biblical drama.

“We can say that the entire *kosmos*, the world God loves (John 3:16), is the scene of the struggle between God and the devil. When Jesus says to Pilate, ‘My kingdom is not of this *kosmos* [world]’ (John 18:36), his meaning is clear: the sphere of power belonging to God, who created the universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), has invaded the Enemy, and in the most inconceivable way possible – the willed self-offering of God the Son to human wickedness in a scene of barbaric execution.”⁵

Advent is hard for us to grasp because, when we sentimentalize it into Christmas sweetness, we fail to remember the sweep of the Biblical narrative that includes not only life, but also death and resurrection. In Jesus, God’s future has arrived among us and that future is

⁴ Borrowed from Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967).

⁵ Fleming Rutledge, *ADVENT: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 15-16).

pulling us forward into God. This pull forward to God's future is thwarted by our sinful insistence on privileging a world order that is totally immanent, defined by a utilitarian materialism that closes off the vertical dimension, what theologians call transcendence. The most bedeviling part of this is that to the extent that we have fallen prey to this secularism, we less and less see people as human beings but more as "human doings," and the importance of their doing is defined materially and economically by dollar productivity. Our escape saying is, "Well, it's business" . . . as if all of life is a business. Our greatest deception is that we have increasingly come to believe that this actually constitutes reality, when it is actually a modern construal of reality. If I understand the Bible and the Season of Advent, this entire construal must be called into question. Human beings are not economic pawns on life's business chess board. On the contrary, created in the image and likeness of God, every person is of ultimate intrinsic worth. So much so, that God came to save.

To travel with God into the offering of Advent, we must be converted. We have to break through the downward pull of the gravity built into our modern Christmas spin: A materialist construal of life within the *immanent frame* that does not recognize itself as construal-bound and circumscribed by the Modern Moral Order: The organization of society for individual social and economic benefit rather than an obligation to "higher" or eternal norms.

The reason Advent is so hard for us is that it is actually a call to repentance. We want the kingdom of Jesus, but we want it ordered other than the way he himself describes it, "My kingdom is not of this world." (Jn 18:36). Advent and incarnation are not God's response because all is well in the universe. Hear these words from the poet W. H. Auden:

*Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play.
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort [our buffered self] assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,*

*Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.*⁶

I was talking last night with my sister-in-law, Jan Gunter, about my talk for this morning, and she remembered the phrase “slouching toward Bethlehem” from the poet William Butler Yeats (William Butler Yeats (13 June 1865 – 28 January 1939). Jan majored in English language and literature at Southern Nazarene University, so she remembers such things. Listen how Yeats, who lived a century ago, sounds like he could be writing today:

The Second Coming

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: . . .
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

⁶ W. H. Auden, “September 1, 1939,” in *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945), 57.

Extreme ironic poetic question by Yeats. Jesus is a 'rough beast' because he is so totally unlike what we would design. He is a threat to our established order and he strikes fear in our souls when we see who Jesus really is and what he represents – a comprehensive challenge to our Modern Moral Order. Are you and I this day “slouching toward Bethlehem” rather than leaning into this marvelous Season of Promise? The multiple dimensions of Advent are hard for us because we have created and are propagating an alien world order. We insist on seeing it as reality, when it is in fact our material construal of reality. We want our ways to be God’s ways. We avoid the hard truth that the mosaic of Advent includes the Garden of Gethsemane and Golgotha. Advent and Incarnation are God’s response to our human predicament: “Lost in a haunted wood, children afraid of the night, who have never been happy or good.”

But, praise be to God, the Advent mosaic also includes Easter:

*Lo, he comes with clouds descending
Once for our salvation slain;
Thousand thousand saints attending
Swell the triumphant strain.
Allelulia!
Alelulia!
Christ the Lord returns to reign.⁷*

So, in this Season, we purpose to do the hard work to live into the full significance of Advent – because there we will discover afresh and anew the “reason for the Season.” When this “reason” gets a hold on us, we might just experience Christian conversion. How could we not!? We enter Advent in anticipation of the “Joy to the World,” the “already” but “not yet,” God has come!

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⁷ Charles Wesley, “Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending,” The United Methodist Hymnal, 718.